

# Fire of Youth -- by Henry James Forman

(Cont'd from Last Sunday)

## CHAPTER XXII. (Cont'd).

### The Woman in Black.

ANTHONY was reading the *Gazette des Ardennes*. He declared that he could sign himself the "constant reader" of the *Gazette*. This was the German propaganda paper which carried the German efficiency in propaganda to the nth point. It purported to be written wholly by Belgians, Alsatians, Lorrainers—by anybody except Germans. Its object was to show the wisdom, benevolence and common sense of all the Allies in opposing them. It was really to the point of absurdity—yet the Germans were convinced that it was cleverer than they. Anthony thought of the Allied paper, a really distinguished journal, written by Germans for Germans, without lies, and circulated from Switzerland by tens of thousands, through the German Imperial mails. Yet the Germans felt themselves to be infallible.

It was after eight. He was in the lounge waiting for Vilma. He recalled suddenly what Sidney had said about her being suspected. Perhaps, he reflected, she has to ask permission from Willie the Rat before she can come and talk to him. At eight-ten, when there was a cool left in the lounge, when all were at dinner, Vilma, in soft, clinging black, came gliding toward him. He rose as she approached. She held out her hand and smiled upon him graciously.

"This is like old times, Anthony. Dear, isn't it?" she murmured. Her face flared upon his nerves. To think that he had once been callow enough to be in love with this woman!

"Old times," he said, "no, they will never come back. They never do. The world moves on."

"You do not think the Germans will win?" she caught him up in a tone of alarm. "That would be dreadful!" She made room for him on the sofa as she seated herself. "Not a chance!" he murmured with a short laugh. "In a year from now we shall have five million men under arms and our resources are unlimited."

"A year? How you talk!" she smiled. "Must we have war another year?"

"Not necessarily—they may crack sooner!" Vilma's pretty eyes looked at him.

"You talk like a general, Anthony."

"Our generals don't talk," he said. "Now listen, Anthony," she suddenly diverged, laying a soft hand on his. "I know you did not ask me to come here to talk about the war."

She paused as though expecting a reply. But the cold look from his steady gray eyes gave her no encouragement. She looked furtively about and leaned toward him.

"We have such heaps and heaps of other things to talk of, you and I," she sighed—"those golden days. Anthony—oh, don't say they will not come back."

He made a gesture as though his own hand was about to close over hers, then quickly drew back his hand.

"Vilma," he began in a low tone, "don't try to hurt me any more than you have done already. You ought to be satisfied with that. I won't even ask you why you did it. Suppose that is the nature"—he paused. His heart was suddenly flooded with a great gratitude. Supposing she had married him! He heard he could not dissemble before her successfully for long.

"Anthony—my dear," she spoke with a pretty, faltering seriousness. "I could only make you understand"—Could that be real emotion in her voice? For a moment he was baffled.

"Oh, never mind that now," he broke in bitterly. "But there is one thing I want to ask of you, Vilma."

"Anything, Anthony," she whispered.

"I know you will understand. That little pendant I gave you," he went on rapidly. "If I had bought it in a shop you know very well I should never even have referred to it—for any—ing—even if it had cost me three pounds. But that thing is of no particular value. It represents nothing in the way of money. But my mother left it to me. It means everything to me. It means more to me than you can imagine. Vilma, I beg of you to give me back that pendant."

Vilma looked dazed for a moment. She carried her exquisitely manicured right hand to her eyes

and her polished nails gleamed and shone. With her left hand she gripped his.

"Oh, Anthony, Anthony—my dear! I know. But what shall I do? You poor boy! I know how you feel about it! But—Anthony—I cannot look you in the face. I have lost it—the pendant!"

A flush of hot anger shot upward into his eyes.

"That I don't believe for one minute," he told her harshly. "I'll pay you for it whatever you ask—I'll borrow money if necessary. But give it back to me!"

Vilma was less offended by being accused of falsehood than even he had expected.

"Oh, my dear boy," she implored, "don't talk that way. Believe me—believe me—it is true! I have eaten my heart out about it. It meant so much to me! I would give anything to have it back. I would myself pay anything—but it is gone," and she made a despairing gesture at the bitterness of fate.

"Where did you lose it?" he asked feebly. "Did that"—he was about to ask her whether her Austrian had taken it from her, but he checked himself in time. He did not wish at that moment to betray his full knowledge of her degradation.

"How can I tell?" she wailed. "It was while I was ill—in New York—last Summer—all alone there. You were already gone—in the army, they told me, when I telephoned. I was all alone—and I was so ill—some other jewels of mine were stolen also. Oh, Anthony, my dear, forgive me, forgive me—but what can I do?"

"Nothing," he muttered angrily. "not even make me believe!"

"But you must believe me, Anthony, dear, you must," she insisted with gathering vehemence, "for the sake of our love you must believe me. I'll prove it to you—I'll tell you everything—you will see—you know I loved you there in New York—and a woman's heart does not change so lightly—and I know you loved me, too. Oh, give me a little time, Anthony—look into my eyes, my dear—you will see—how precious all that was to me."

Anthony was startled for a moment. Was he blinded with fatuity or did he actually behold for an instant the old look of passion in Vilma's sensual eyes? He was about to speak. But at this point Von Rathenau sauntered out of the bar, and with a curiously malignant glance at the pair sitting in the alcove, which was only a couple of yards to the left of the door whence he had come, he stalked across the room into the lobby. They saw him whispering to the coat-room attendant just outside of the lounge room.

"Another of his jacksals," thought Anthony.

"Oh, do you suppose he heard us?" she breathed, and on her face was undisguised alarm.

"Possibly," was the curt reply.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Why do you care about that. Do you know him?"

"No—of course not," she answered hastily. "Who is he?"

"He is one of the rats about this place," he told her.

"A German," she whispered, interpreting. "Does he speak English?" Her question seemed purely perfunctory. She was preoccupied with her discovery of Von Rathenau's near presence.

"As well as you or I," Anthony told her. But the words seemed to make no impression upon her. She was obviously thinking of something else.

"Ah, well," she suddenly recollected herself. "I must go now. They will be coming from dinner before we know it; we must talk somewhere—more private—not here. I have much to tell you, my dear. You will see how unfortunate I have been." She spoke more calmly now. "And, Anthony, I will prove to you what you have meant," she checked herself. "I will think of a place where we can talk," she concluded, "and let you know."

"Thanks," he murmured coldly. "Will you have a liqueur before you go?"

She declined on the plea that it was late and floated away toward the lobby.

Anthony stood alone and silent for a space, absorbed in his own thoughts.

"So that is that," he said to himself. "She is lying—but that ends all hope of getting back the pendant. And she and Willie the Rat know each other—that's sure."

The following day Vilma did not appear in the dining room, and two days later, when Anthony inquired at the desk, the clerk informed him that Madame Vanleer had left the hotel the preceding afternoon. She might have gone to Zurich, he declared, but—equally possible—she might well have gone to Geneva or Lausanne. The porter did not get her ticket. She went alone.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### Intrigue.

THE Spring and early Summer of nineteen-eighteen was one of the worst periods for Allied nationals to live through anywhere, excepting possibly at the

front. At a non-combatant post like that of the military mission in Switzerland, with the absence of the din and shock and stir of even preparation for fighting, the cold facts pouring in from day to day were beyond description horrible. It looked as though Ludendorff's last desperate offensive might succeed after all.

The French attaches were ominously insistent that even the taking of Paris by no means spelled victory for the Teutons. There were the Americans coming in even greater strength. Our navy was patrolling the ocean lane. Hundreds of thousands of American soldiers were streaming into Europe, even as the Congress at Washington was pouring billions of dol-

lars into the holocaust. All were eager, intense, alert, keyed up with an immense explosive power at the service of the trigger of offensive war. Unity of command under Foch had been achieved as early as the British disaster, but still the Germans were coming on. The trigger was still waiting to be pulled.

Again and again they hurled their massed divisions, advanced miles upon miles daily, and took thousands of prisoners and hundreds of guns. Their shelling of Paris, at a distance of seventy-five miles, made neutral Europe tremble, and the terror of their air raids on Paris and London seemed more horrible in the fierce, glaring light of their undoubted victories. By the first of June the Germans were again only forty miles from Paris.

To Anthony's chief, Colonel Cole, that excellent soldier who knew much about cavalry tactics and Western army-post routine, came almost daily injunctions to do his best at discovering the channels in Switzerland through which military intelligence was passing from France to the Germans. Colonel Cole, who knew no fear and would willingly have gone even to Germany to discover the spies, was completely at a loss. He showed

of Interlaken and to probe with a long iron hook for a casket of papers supposed to be sunk in a well behind a certain chalet, risking death at the owner's hands had he discovered them and taken them for burglars. The casket was said to contain a list of the German agents operating in Switzerland, together with their plans. Anthony and Ray came away undiscovered—but no casket came forth from the well.

"How silly and preposterous and dime-novelish all this is!" exclaimed Anthony in disgust as he drove his car toward Berne. "This is the horrible and shameful side of war, Ray—one of the many horrible and shameful sides—and you and I are the goats."

"Well, we got away with it!" retorted Ray, who was a mere lad, but his knowledge of the Swiss dialect, which he had learned at a Vevey boarding school, made him valuable.

"Got away—with what?" sniffed Anthony.

"We didn't get caught," he defended.

"This kind of war is for the German," Anthony growled and angrily stepped on his accelerator.

Recklessness was the prevailing note of the Allied men in the face of the German insolence of success. That month of June the Italian successes on the Piave were the only ray of hope.

Anthony will always remember the second of July, because on that date came the heartening news to the office—President Wilson's announcement that one million American troops had already crossed to France. He called up Clarkson at the Red Cross office, gave several kinds of cowboy yells, and ended up with the cry of the Mosby guerrillas.

"At my room to-night," he finally said, "at ten o'clock, a little liquid refreshment to celebrate the event."

"All right!" laughed Anthony happily. "This time there's some reason for your vulgar extravagance—that only you can afford."

"How you talk!" mocked Clarkson in a falsetto. "Wait till you get back to Little Rapids!"

The name of his native town, as he hung up the receiver on the clumsy, kitchen-cabinet-like Swiss telephone took Anthony's mind to the image of Adela, and that, perversely, brought back his last interview with Vilma.

"That awful woman!" he muttered under his breath, and he wondered whether there was any truth in the oft-repeated human tenet that every person, how abandoned soever, had a portion of good in him, a spark of the divine attributes. She was one hundred per cent evil. The way she talked that evening—her protestations, her play-acting! He had had it confirmed since from a variety of sources that she was one of Von Rathenau's hirelings—or worse. She had been seen at Freiburg, at Lausanne and in Geneva again. Yet he had thought—what was the matter with his own so-called brain? How had he ever allowed himself to be taken in by such a woman? Did he know anything at all of human nature? And here he was supposed to be in the American intelligence service.

"I hope some of these fellows have more intelligence than I," he told himself bitterly and endeavored to dismiss the woman from his mind. But for some reason the memory of her, like an evil odor, seemed to hang about him that afternoon—and such a beautiful afternoon, too! It was one of the rare, brilliant days of Berne, when there was no rain, no cloud. It was one of the days one could see to Jungfrau—the Jungfrau, towering, majestic, pointing a glittering, snowy finger to heaven, as though reminding the stewing, simmering mass of preoccupied, intriguing humanity below that in that perfect azure serenity above lay all the happiness that mankind could desire, if only man would lift his head.

It was six o'clock. He took the shaded Thunstrasse into Helvetiaplatz and crossed the Aar over the Kirchenfeldbrücke, his step promptly losing all elasticity as soon as his feet touched the suspension bridge. That was a curious phenomenon that plagued his interest. It always happened on that bridge. He attributed it to the rigidity and poor construction of a bridge of that length and more than a hundred feet high. It was as though one's feet trusted it. And the word "distrust" again brought Vilma to his mind.

"Shall I never get rid of the thought of that woman?" he asked

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"A fierce passion of fury shook him. His hands suddenly jerked upward, fingers open and curved, as though a force almost uncontrollable within him was about to strangle her."